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Good writing requires good ideas

Bob Hillman

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NOW that teachers and students have completed two years of the current VCE English course comprising the new section, "Creating and Presenting", it seems to have developed into an informative, challenging and satisfying area of study. The result of this is a variety of insightful and provocative writing in a range of approaches.

"Creating and Presenting" offers a choice of four Contexts published in the VCAA book list. Currently, the Contexts are "Encountering conflict", "The imaginative Landscape", "Exploring issues of identity and belonging" and "Whose reality?". Each Context contains a list of four texts, two of which must be studied throughout the year. After two years, one text has changed in each of the Contexts, so for some classes they have the exciting challenge of exploring a new text from the list.

Students are required to produce up to three assessed pieces in each of Units 3 and 4. In Unit 3 this is worth 30 per cent of the Unit assessment, but 50 per cent in Unit 4. One third of the final examination is dedicated to Context.

There still seems to be some confusion, however, about the role of the text in "Creating and Presenting". Last year one of my students showed me an online conversation among a group of Victorian students about Context as they prepared for their final examination. The discussion seemed to be about how much of the text needed to be used in their writing.

One declared that it needed to be 40 per cent from the texts and 60 per cent more general analysis. This was debated and discussed with varying responses. The students involved appeared to be intelligent, hard-working students and their comments were supportive and attempting to be helpful to one another. Their advice, however, showed a substantial misunderstanding of the role of text in "Creating and presenting". It appeared that the task had been reduced to some formulaic approach and had failed to grasp the manner in which the texts are used to expand and explore ideas from a Context.

It is doubtful that a director or author had the specific Context in mind when they were composing their films or books. Nevertheless, embedded within the text, and within the characters are rich opportunities for exploration of reality or identity or conflict. And similarly to the "Reading and responding" section of the

course, there is no "correct" or expected response. Each class will interpret what the text has to offer in its own way, providing students with a potential wealth of ideas to draw on for their own writing.

The key notion here is the transference of ideas, rather than some notion about how much of a text is "required". The focus of this section is on student writing, but there cannot be good writing without good ideas and the texts provide worthwhile insights that students need to incorporate into their writing. It is the quality of ideas gained and used rather than the number.

Some students may choose to take on the voice of a particular character and create a fictional scene using that character, linking directly ideas understood from their study of the character. This seems popular with *The Catcher in the Rye* whereby a number of students choose to explore the disaffection of youth through the voice of Holden Caulfield. Naturally, some of these pieces are excellent, providing students with a structure, voice and audience that can be genuine and follow on from their exploration of the text.

Likewise, a number of students have tried creating a piece of prose from *The Crucible*, studying conflict through the eyes and voice of characters such as John Proctor, Elizabeth or even Abigail. The challenge for these pieces often has less to do with relevance to Conflict, but creating an authentic piece of writing that is not predictable and superficial in its presentation of ideas.

A different approach to writing that seems to be growing in popularity is personal narrative. Some students have been able to extrapolate ideas from their Context and texts to produce thoughtful, engaging pieces of writing. The challenge here is to ensure that there is a clear connection between the ideas from the text(s) and the piece of writing.

This should not be difficult for the writing done at school, as there is a requirement of an accompanying reflective commentary, where the student has the opportunity to share insights into both the content and the composition of their writing. In the examination, however, there is no provision for a student to offer a statement of intention or reflective commentary and the onus is then on the student to show the connection between the ideas of the text they have nominated on the front of their script book and the piece of writing itself.

Other students prefer an expository style of writing where they have the capacity to step back from various texts and explore the Context and prompt through intelligent discourse. In these cases a student may even choose to quote a text in order to support a particular idea. Again, it is important to remember that there are no "rules" for student writing beyond the requirement to demonstrate that the piece of writing has been informed by at least one of the listed texts.

A few students have chosen a persuasive approach to writing. In choosing this, they often have a clear sense of the purpose and audience, as well as a piece of writing that leads to a definite conclusion. While these are the forms of writing on offer to students, many very effective pieces have crossed the various forms and come up with something of a "hybrid" approach.

A number of effective pieces have begun with an anecdote or story, then moved into something that is far more expository or persuasive for the remainder of the piece. This is a common practice among professional writers and is readily apparent in both the A2 and Insight sections of *The Age* every Saturday.

It is crucial that student writing is sophisticated in both the control of language in the selected approach to writing and in the ideas that are being presented. One of the problems that has emerged for some students over the past two years is that discussions are too generalised and offer little insight into the Context or prompt other than the most superficial ideas. A year's study of multiple texts and discussions surrounding the

Context should offer students ample opportunity for profound insights into the Context and these should emerge in their writing. Again, there can be no good writing without good ideas.

Ultimately, the key to success in this Area of Study is to consider the inter-relationship between three crucial ingredients: the quality of the writing, the quality of the ideas and the ability to deal with prompts. Most importantly, this part of the course is about writing. In most respects, it has replaced the writing folio of the previous course. Throughout the year students will be given the opportunity to improve their writing and to develop a better understanding of writing in different forms and for different audiences.

Students should be bold and confident in their writing, not overly conservative in the way they present their ideas on their Context. For some an imaginative approach is perfect, for others a more expository approach may work. But each student must find his or her own strengths, address weaknesses and write in a provocative, sophisticated and entertaining manner to show off the skills and knowledge they have gained through writing and thinking about the landscape, conflict, reality or identity.

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